

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 AID-05

SCCT-01 DHA-02 IO-11 LAB-04 SIL-01 PC-01 EB-07 COME-00

AGR-05 OMB-01 TRSE-00 /095 W
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FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA

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INFO AMEMBASSY CARACAS

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 3650

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PINT, PINS, ECON, CO

SUBJECT: THE WEEK IN COLOMBIA

1. SUMMARY. FIRM GOC MEASURES LATE LAST WEEK DIRECTED AGAINST STUDENT VIOLENCE AND STRIKING TEACHERS IMPOSED AN ATMOSPHERE OF RELATIVE CALM. PRESIDENT LOPEZ, IN HIS FIRST PUBLIC APPEARANCE SINCE LAST WEEK'S DISTURBANCES, DEFENDED HIS ADMINISTRATION BEFORE THE FOREIGN PRESS CORPS AND TOOK THEM TO TASK. A MESSAGE ALLEGEDLY FROM LABOR LEADER MERCADO'S KIDNAPPERS THREATENED TO KILL MERCADO UNLESS THE GOC ACCEDED TO SEVERAL DEMANDS. FURTHER MONETARY MEASURES WERE ANNOUNCED, DESIGNED TO CONTROL THE GROWTH OF INTERNATIONAL RESERVES, WHICH IS NUDGING INFLATION. THE GOC DECREED THE END OF THE MID-TERM ELECTION CAMPAIGN, AS CUSTOMARY, TOGETHER WITH MEASURES DESIGNED TO SAFEGUARD PUBLIC ORDER DURING THE ELECTIONS ON APRIL 18. END SUMMARY.

2. DISORDERS SUBSIDE--LABOR SCENE QUIET. LAST WEEK THE GOC CLOSE THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY, MILITARY COMMANDERS WERE TOLD TO HAVE TROOPS DEFEND THEMSELVES WITH WEAPONS
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DURING DISTURBANCES (BOGOTA 3398) AND MINISTER OF EDUCATION

DURAN AND ASSOCIATES BEGAN FIRING TEACHERS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE ILLEGAL STRIKE MARCH 25 (BOGOTA 3183) CALLED BY THE MAOIST-LED NATIONAL TEACHERS FEDERATION (FECODE). THESE MEASURES CAUSED A SHARP REDUCTION IN PUBLIC DISORDERS THIS WEEK. CONTINUED SCATTERED ACTS OF VIOLENCE INCLUDED THREE BOMBINGS IN BOGOTA OVER LAST WEEKEND (BOGOTA 3423) AND ROCK THROWING BY SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN ONE OF THE POOR SECTIONS OF BOGOTA AND IN THREE ATLANTIC COAST CITIES, WHERE THREE AUTOMOBILES WERE ALSO BURNED. THE STUDENT, WHO WERE INCITED BY SOME OF THE FIRED TEACHERS, WERE QUICKLY CONTROLLED WITHOUT SERIOUS DIFFICULTY. MEANWHILE, ANOTHER TWO-DAY TEACHERS' STRIKE CALLED BY FECODE FOR APRIL 6 AND 7 WAS UNSUCCESSFUL, AND MANY TEACHERS WHO PARTICIPATED WERE ALSO FIRED. THE BANK SECTOR, WHERE THERE HAD BEEN SOME EARLIER VIOLENCE REMAINED QUIET.

3. LOPEZ REPROACHES FOREIGN PRESS CORPS. PRESIDENT LOPEZ RECEIVED THE FOREIGN PRESS CORPS ON APR 7 IN A PRESS CONFERENCE WHICH WAS SOMEWHAT MARRED BY PRESIDENTIAL TESTINESS AND ILL HUMOR, APPARENTLY A RESULT OF LOPEZ'S SENSITIVITY TO PRESS CRITICISM, ESPECIALLY TO A FOREIGN "BAD PRESS" WHICH MIGHT HARM COLOMBIA'S IMAGE ABROAD. THE CONFERENCE (TEXT POUCHED ARA/NC), LARGE PARTS OF WHICH APPEARED ON EVENING TV NEWS SHOWS, WAS LOPEZ'S FIRST PUBLIC APPEARANCE SINCE BEFORE THE WEEK OF STUDENT DISORDERS THAT CULMINATED IN THE CLOSING OF THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY ON APRIL 2. LOPEZ HAD BEEN ILL DURING THAT PERIOD. THE PRESIDENT CITED THE ECONOMIC ACHIEVEMENTS OF HIS ADMINISTRATION, INDICATED THE EXISTENCE OF A PLOT TO UNDERMINE COLOMBIAN INSTITUTIONS(CITING DEMANDS BY MERCADO'S KIDNAPPERS, SEE BELOW), POINTED AT THAT SOCIAL INEQUITIES PREDATED HIS ADMINISTRATION AND DERIDED RUMORS OF MILITARY COUP PLOTTING AGAINST HIS GOVERNMENT. WITH REGARD TO THE U.S., LOPEZ CHARACTERIZED THE USG ROLE IN THE DRUG PROBLEM AS "CONSTRUCTIVE", EXPLAINED THE LEGAL DIFFICULTIES INHIBITING LOCKHEED BRIBE INFORMATION FROM THE CHURCH COMMITTEE, AND DENIED A U.S. NEWS AND WORLD REPORT STORY THAT HE HAD EXPRESSED TO THE SECRETARY HIS CONCERN OVER POSSIBLE CUBAN INFILTRATION IN THE BLACK POPULATION ON COLOMBIA'S ATLANTIC COAST. LOPEZ RETURNED REPEATEDLY DURING THE CONFERENCE TO VENT SARCASTIC COMMENTS ON STRINGER TIMOTHY ROSS, WHOSE BYLINE

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APPEARED ON A STORY TITLED "DEMOCRACY FAILING IN COLOMBIA, TOO" IN THE MARCH 28 NEW YORK TIMES. LOPEZ HAD LEARNED THAT ROSS HAD GONE ARMED INTO THE VICINITY OF THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY DURING THE STUDENT DISORDERS AND HE MADE THIS, AS WELL AS WHAT HE TERMED ROSS'S "SENSATIONALISM" THE FOCUS OF HIS IRRITATION. LEAD EDITORIALS IN LIBERAL DAILIES EL TIEMPO AND EL ESPECTADOR PRAISED LOPEZ'S PERFORMANCE, BUT SOME COLOMBIAN TV WATCHERS AND CORRESPONDENTS APPEARED TO LESS FAVORABLY

IMPRESSED. IT IS UNLIKELY THAT THE CONFERENCE WILL HELP LOPEZ TO ACHIEVE A MORE FAVORABLE PRESS IMAGE ABROAD.

4. M-19 THREATENS TO EXECUTE MERCADO. THE TERRORIST GROUP M-19, ALLEGED TO BE HOLDING KIDNAPPED LABOR LEADER JOSE MERCADO ISSUED A COMMUNIQUE ON APRIL 6 STATING THAT MERCADO WOULD BE EXECUTED IF THE GOC FAILED TO MEET A NUMBER OF DEMANDS. THE GROUP SAID THE DAY OF THE EXECUTION WOULD BE ANNOUNCED ON APRIL 19 (BOGOTA 3535). THE GOC HAS REFUSED TO MEET THE DEMANDS. MEANWHILE, POLICE HELD FOR QUESTIONING SEVERAL MEMBERS OF AN EXTREME LEFT NATIONAL POPULAR ALLIANCE (ANAPO) FACTION, INCLUDING A MEMBER OF CONGRESS, WHO THE POLICE REPORTEDLY BELIEVE MAY HAVE TIES TO THE M-19.

5. FURTHER STABILIZATION MEASURES. THE GOC TOOK A SERIES OF ADDITIONAL MEASURES THIS WEEK TO CONTROL THE MONETARY IMPACT OF INCREASING COFFEE EARNINGS. THE COFFEE FEDERATION AND THE ADMINISTRATION AGREED TO A SCHEME, BY WHICH COFFEE RETENTION WILL BE INCREASED AS COFFEE PRICES GO ABOVE \$1.20. THE COFFEE RETAINED WILL BE MARKED BY THE FEDERATION AND THE EARNINGS KEPT IN AN EXTERNAL FUND FOR FUTURE STABILIZATION OF EARNINGS. THERE WAS TALK OF A SIMILAR FUND LAST YEAR BUT NO PROGRESS WAS MADE. THIS YEAR, SINCE THE FEDERATION IS COOPERATING FULLY, THE FUND WILL PROBABLY BECOME A REALITY. OTHER MEASURES TAKEN TO STEM THE FLOW OF DOLLARS INTO THE ECONOMY INCLUDED DISINCENTIVES FOR ADVANCE COFFEE PAYMENTS AND AND 18 PCT AD VALORUM TAX AT THE TIME EXPORTS OF COFFEE ARE REGISTERED. THE MEASURES HAVE BEEN NECESSARY BECAUSE FOREIGN RESERVES HAVE CONTINUED TO GROW THROUGHTOUT 1976 DESPITE A SERIES OF MEASURES DESIGNED TO CONTAIN RESERVE GROWTH WHICH HAS AN INFLATIONARY EFFECT. THE CONSUMER PRICE INDEX HAS BEEN INCREASING AT OR VERY CONFIDENTIAL

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SLIGHTLY BELOW 1975 RATES.

6. MID-TERM ELECTION CAMPAIGN WINDS DOWN. THE MID-TERM ELECTION CAMPAIGN DREW TO AN END AS THE GOC ISSUED A DECREE ENDING CAMPAIGNING ON APRIL 11, ONE WEEK PRIOR TO THE APR 18 ELECTION, A NORMAL PROCEDURE IN COLOMBIAN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS. SEVERAL PARTY FACTIONS HAD ALREADY ANNOUNCED THE TERMINATION OF THEIR CAMPAIGNS IN ANTICIPATION OF THE GOC ACTION. FOLLOWERS OF FORMER PRESIDENT OSPINA (CONSERVATIVE) ENDED THEIR CAMPAIGN ON APR 8, THE DAY OF THE DECREE. COINCIDENTALLY, THE 84-YEAR OLD FORMER PRESIDENT WAS HOSPITALIZED FOR A MAJOR OPERATION. OF THE IMPORTANT GROUPS, ONLY THE LLERISTA LIBERALS PLAN TO CAMPAIGN UP TO THE OFFICIAL LIMIT. ACCORDING TO THE DECREE, DEMONSTRATIONS, MEETINGS AND PARADES OF A POLITICAL NATURE ARE BANNED UNTIL APRIL 27,

POLITICAL SPEECHES ON RADIO AND TV ARE PROHIBITED FROM
APRIL 12 UNTIL AFTER THE ELECTION AND ALCOHOLIC
BEVERAGE SALES ARE BANNED ON ELECTION DAY AND ON
APRIL 26, WHEN THE OFFICIAL RESULTS ARE SCHEDULED TO
BE ANNOUNCED.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: REPORTS, POLITICAL SITUATION, STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS, NATIONAL ELECTIONS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 09 APR 1976
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: coburnhl
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976BOGOTA03650
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760135-0846
From: BOGOTA
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19760480/aaaacpvm.tel
Line Count: 175
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION ARA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: coburnhl
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 14 JUL 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <14 JUL 2004 by MartinML>; APPROVED <26 OCT 2004 by coburnhl>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: THE WEEK IN COLOMBIA
TAGS: PFOR, PINT, PINS, ECON, CO
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006